

# DESERET Morning News

## Eco-groups might prefer new Dixie bill

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Deseret Morning News

*Published: April 10, 2008*

WASHINGTON — A Washington County lands bill that has been revised to include more wilderness areas may garner support from environmental groups.

The once controversial bill has been revived, with the changes, by Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, and Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah. The Washington County Growth & Conservation Act of 2008, as it is called, would allow a little more than 9,000 acres of non-environmentally sensitive public land to be sold under local guidelines developed through a smart growth initiative called Vision Dixie, Bennett said.

This is a decrease from the 24,300 acres proposed in the 2006 version of the bill, but "that number was always a cap and not a goal," Bennett said. That bill received committee hearings but never was voted on in either the House or Senate.

"After five years at the table with all interested stakeholders, Congressman Matheson and I have produced a bill that successfully strikes a balance between conservation and growth in Washington County," Bennett said in a statement. "Parties on all sides of this debate have repeatedly told me it would be impossible to broker a deal on this emotional issue which, for decades, has caused people to dig in their heels. The persistence we've applied now appears to be paying off as our bill has gained extremely diverse support and a very good chance of passing."

Bennett said he hopes to have a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee hearing on the bill before the end of the month. There is still plenty of time to get the bill through this year.

"So many previous antagonists are now on board," Bennett said. "I found people on all sides were getting sick of the controversy."

The highlights of the bill include:

- 264,394 acres of land would be added to the National Wilderness Preservation System, increasing the amount of wilderness acreage in the county from 3.5 percent to 20.5 percent.
- The creation of two National Conservation Areas to provide 140,000 acres for the protected desert tortoise, as well as recreational uses.
- 123,000 more acres of permanently protected land than was included in the previous bill.

- 9,000 acres of public land would be sold to private developers, with all of the money either going to the county or being used locally by the Bureau of Land Management.
- A proposed utility corridor for the Lake Powell pipeline and a northern transportation corridor are not included, although Bennett said these changes could be made through the administration.
- Designation of 165 miles of the Virgin River as a Wild and Scenic River, the first one in Utah.

"We've made some real progress with this bill," said Washington County Commission Chairman Jim Eardley.

"There's still far too much wilderness in it, but with today's political climate it's probably the best we can do."

If the revised lands bill is passed into law, Eardley said the ramifications for Washington County are significant.

"It is going to change the landscape of southwestern Utah," he said. "We are going to protect the off-highway routes we already have and will try to respect and protect the mining claims. We also hope to ensure the transportation and utility route rights-of-way are maintained. We need to do that in order to manage our growth."

The Utah Wilderness Coalition is still evaluating the bill but said it is "an improvement" over the previous bill, although they still had concerns about the land disposal and distribution of revenues from land sales.

"With Washington County's burgeoning population putting tremendous pressures on the area's resources, this bill would designate as wilderness many of the region's most wild and diverse areas," said the coalition, which includes the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society.

Bennett and Matheson modeled their bill after similar ones proposed by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and John Ensign, R-Nev., for Nevada's Clark and Lincoln counties, each of which became law.

"This new bill shows that bipartisan effort — with all interested stakeholders — can resolve long-running contentious public land issues in a way that protects the land, the economy and the way of life in Washington County," said Matheson, who will introduce the House version of the bill later this month. "It's a real breakthrough in my state, following on the heels of the historic Vision Dixie planning process, where the past has been marked by a lot of rhetoric, but not much progress. I am proud of our effort and I'm proud of the collaboration at the local, state and federal level."

Dave Livermore, The Nature Conservancy's Utah State Director, also said the bill was "greatly improved" from the earlier version and has his support.

"If passed, this new bill will go a long way towards protecting the key natural areas which make Washington County such a special place," he said.

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